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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
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RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2967
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000094

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN AND INL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/20/2019

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: UNODC PROMOTES CROSS-BORDER
COOPERATION WITH AFGHANISTAN, LOOKS AHEAD TO IRAN

REF: 08 ASHGABAT 1378

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, per reasons 1.4(B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During an introductory meeting with the Charge, the head of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) office in Turkmenistan described his continued efforts to promote bilateral counter-narcotics and border security cooperation between Turkmenistan and neighboring countries. He said that it is complicated not only by a lack of political will, but also the minimal information sharing within and between the various agencies of the Turkmen government. UNODC's projects to date have focused on Afghan-Turkmen cross-border cooperation, after which they hope to turn their attention to similar issues between Turkmenistan/Iran and Turkmenistan/Uzbekistan. END SUMMARY.

RAISING TURKMEN CONSCIOUSNESS ABOUT DRUG PROBLEM

¶2. (C) In a meeting with the Charge on 14 January, Ercan Saka, UNODC Turkmenistan's Project Coordinator, outlined his mission's goals and the many challenges involved in coordinating counter-narcotics projects in Turkmenistan. He said that it was only in the past two years that Turkmenistan's government, which he called "in denial," has really acknowledged the country's drug and organized crime problems. He has devoted much of his effort to raising the awareness of the drug issue, which is also a regional problem.

¶3. (C) Saka described his follow-up work at the Imam Nazar (Afghan border) crossing station, recently rebuilt with USG (CENTCOM) funding. Before the reconstruction project, he said, Imam Nazar had "no infrastructure whatsoever: No electricity, no water, not even a road." UNODC is now focused, he said, on follow-up work and border security training projects with the Turkmen government. He would like to encourage a long-term arrangement between the Turkmen and Afghan governments for counter narcotics intelligence and cross-border cooperation. One of the chief frustrations he faces is the government's tendency to treat all such matters as a "national secret." In his efforts to bring all of the various agencies together, he said, he emphasizes to the participants that international experience has shown that close cooperation between government agencies is the best recipe for success in counter narcotics.

URGING TURKMEN TO DEVELOP CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION WITH
AFGHANS

¶4. (C) Saka says that he continues trying to push the Turkmen to develop cross-border cooperation with the Afghans. He said that when he arranged the first ever cross-border meeting between Turkmen and Afghan border and law enforcement officials in October (Reftel), the Afghan side was very enthusiastic, but the Turkmen reaction was one of caution. He plans to hold a high-level meeting in Ashgabat in March, and will also invite representatives from other governments in the region, including Uzbekistan and Iran. He hopes that these exchanges will result in the creation of a permanent bilateral meeting process on border security issues, and that "border liaison offices" will be created on both sides.

OBSTACLES IN WORKING WITH TURKMEN AGENCIES

¶5. (C) Saka detailed some of the difficulties he had faced in working with the Turkmen government on counter-narcotics issues. He believes that President Berdimuhamedov understands the severity of the country's drug problem, but that the necessary "political will" is not present in all parts of the government. He said that the government had committed itself to supporting two UNODC projects, but then made the projects part of their own budget rather than providing the funds to UNODC as promised. Although the President created the State Counter-Narcotics Service (SCNS) last year, conflicts still exist between the Ministry of the Interior and the SCNS.

¶6. (C) Saka has now turned his attention to the Farap (Uzbek border) crossing point, which he describes as a

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"bottleneck" for the region's international trade and transit. The Turkmenistan government had pledged to contribute USD 1,000,000 to developing the station, whose construction is being funded and carried out by U.S. CENTCOM, but later changed their offer to one of "in kind" support rather than cash. After Farap, Saka would like to focus his attention on the Iranian border, through which at least 50 percent of the Afghan opiates enter Turkmenistan.

¶7. (C) The Turkmen government only recently started sharing their seizure statistics with UNODC, which now receives information about all seizures over 1 kg. He said that UNODC plans to convene a follow-up meeting in Baku in April to implement the strategy paper that was drawn up at the Caspian Sea Initiative meeting that was held in Ashgabat in June last year, with representatives from all five Caspian Sea states. Like so many others, businesspeople and international technocrats alike, Saka lamented the lack of internet in Turkmenistan, and how this complicates his work and the sharing of information with the government.

¶8. (C) BIO NOTE AND COMMENT: Saka, a Turkish national with a background in law enforcement, has been with the office in Turkmenistan for 18 months, and prior to that served in Latin America with the World Customs Organization (WCO). He is energetic, personable, and unfailingly in good spirits, which is admirable given the challenges of his work. END BIO NOTE AND COMMENT.

MILES